Japan and the Second World War as Global History

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> In Europe traditional political and economic forms come crashing down, new ideas and ideals arise and collide against one another with a great noise and are in turn mercilessly ground to dust. There is an intense and bitter struggle over principles, a restless search for new life values; there is a hellish racket, mistrust, and envy between peoples, classes, and groups; a desperate and chaotic situation reigns in nearly all areas of life. . . . In this chaotic, shaken-up, forward-driving world, amid nations and classes laying siege to one another, in this time of declining and rising worldviews, of the triumph of science and technology, the Indonesian Volk must find its way toward political freedom and national happiness. Will we, ignoring the lessons of European history and closing our eyes to the political, economic, and social failures of the West, steer our cultural course toward the Occidental model . . . ? Must we forever be satisfied with what has been left behind by others and found worthless, trudging behind in the wake of other nations?[1]

These words were written by Sanusi Pané, a spokesman for Indonesia's struggling nationalist movement in November 1931—more than a decade before Japan's victorious imperial armies swept into Southeast Asia under the stirring banner of "Asia for the Asians."

Figure 1: Sanusi Pané, 1930s
Source: https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanusi_Pane

Batavia (or, as nationalists like Pané called it, Jakarta), 1931: In both time and space, a place far removed from where a discussion of the Second World War, or Japan's place within it, would conventionally begin. On the one hand, Pané was clearly speaking from a particular social and geographical position—that of an Asian anti-colonial nationalist struggling against Western domination. But on the other, his statement offers a remarkably sophisticated *global* perspective on the dynamics, challenges,

1 Sanusi Pané, "Java en de 'Buitengewesten'" [Java and the "Hinterlands"]. *Timboel* 5(19):1–2.1931, p. 1.

fears and dreams of the era—one that both highlights and challenges the conventional frame of vision in which the Second World War, and indeed the place of Japan within that war, are conventionally located.

Pané's social perspective and critique has a resonance with viewpoints expressed by many Japanese in the same period—viewpoints that are well known to Japan scholars. It is easy to draw parallels between them and those of, for example, the philosophers and scholars famously associated with the later *shōwa kenkyūkai* or the wartime symposium on "Overcoming Modernity" in 1942, and also to some extent those of General Ishiwara Kanji, the mastermind of Japan's aggressive move to occupy Manchuria in that very same autumn of 1931. As Louise Young and others have shown, not only for Ishiwara and his many followers in the Kwantung Army but for state officials, intellectuals and indeed for a broad cross section Japanese society as a whole, the colonization of Manchuria was a bid to secure resources, "living space," and militarily strategic territory in dangerous global times, but the visions associated with it also quickly assumed revolutionary proportions.[2] Japan was to build in its puppet state of Manchukuo a veritable social "paradise" in which domestic tensions of class versus class, regional tensions of ethnicity and rising anti-colonial resistance, global tensions of great power rivalry and protectionism, and modern afflictions of materialism, individualism and associated moral decay and corruption"imported" from the West would be transcended through a combined "return" to the lost Asian values of the past and a leap into a state-of-the-art, socially engineered future. Manchukuo promised not only a "living space" but a dream landscape in which the very contradictions of Japan's modernity and its multiple crises—economic, social, political, cultural, and imperial—would be resolved at a stroke.

Figure 2: A Chinese-language Japanese propaganda poster proclaims the achievement of a "Manchurian Paradise" through"Full Cooperation between the Army and the People." Source: http://cn.uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/File:Hgq061035194.jpg

2 Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

As scholars such as Harry Harootunian have shown, while inflected locally, such dreams and discourses of "overcoming modernity" were symptomatic of an interwar ideological condition prompted by a multi-layered crisis of liberal industrial capitalist modernity whose global nature, effects and dynamics have been conventionally out of focus. Simultaneously and interactively in Europe and Japan, the perception of the moment as demanding and potentially promising a radical means of "overcoming modernity" was an expression of, in Harootunian's words, being "overcome by modernity."[3] The social dislocations and stark imbalances (what Harootunian calls the characteristic "unevenness") of industrial capitalist economic development and their quickening pace, the emergence of the increasingly assertive masses into political and social life, the rise of radical challenges to the social status quo from the left and the right, the declining authority of established institutions and mores and an associated sense of moral decline, and the virtual collapse of the global liberal capitalist economy triggered by the Wall Street crash of 1929: all were components of the deepest global crisis witnessed in modern times.

Particularly vividly reflected in the Indonesian perspective of Sanusi Pané and in contemporaneous Japanese fantasies of Manchukuo alike is the shared, concurrent perception of a crisis in the Western-dominated global imperial order. Both reflected a sense of living in a time of unprecedented historical vulnerability in that order, offering a correspondingly historic possibility of overcoming it. Yet despite the similarities between Japanese imperialist and Indonesian nationalist rhetoric at this time, it is essential to note that they arose quite independently from one another. This is indeed a reflection of the fundamentally global nature of the crisis that generated them both. Before Japan occupied Indonesia, Sanusi Pané and other Indonesian nationalists such as Sukarno and Hatta identified much less with Asia's sole imperial power Japan—whose aggression in Manchuria they condemned—than with fellow anti-colonial nationalists in places like India and the Middle East.[4]

As Chinese resistance stiffened and Japanese forces became bogged down in a brutal war of colonial suppression in China from 1937, Japan's rhetoric of pursuing a "world-historical" mission of Asian rescue from the clutches of Western modernity, capitalism, and imperialism grew ever more elaborate and shrill, and Japan's population grew more resolutely committed to it.[5] Japan's propaganda campaign failed to win the hearts and minds of most Chinese, however, and it was not yet aimed directly

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3 Harry Harootunian: *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

4 "Japan," wrote Pané in 1930, "has secured a significant place among the great powers, but does not appear capable of bringing changes to the world political or economic structure; in fact, where the lighting of new paths and the opening of new perspectives is concerned, it has achieved little. The task of leading a searching mankind, of laying new social foundations in the light of the eternal, falls to India." Sanusi Pané,"De Boodschap van India" ["India's Message"], *Timboel* 4(8-9), 1930, pp. 112-113.

5 See for example Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People,* translated by Ethan Mark, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

at Southeast (or South) Asians. For the time being, Southeast Asians ranged from apathetic to critical of Japan's war in Northeast Asia. Whatever the fundamental conflict between Japanese imperial and Asian anti-colonial agendas, however, between them stood a common enemy under increasingly global siege—the imperial West—and thus at least the latent potential for a revolutionary joining of forces. In 1942, when Japan backed up its powerful rhetorical critique of modern Western civilization and claims to "liberate" Asia with astounding military success, Sanusi Pané was among many Indonesian nationalists who became—for a time at least—convinced of the "world-historical" necessity of such a collaboration, whatever its risks.[6]

Although the global crisis of empire that preceded and precipitated the Second World War is rarely foregrounded in conventional narratives of that war, its depth and seriousness was felt broadly across Europe as well as outside of it. By the end of the decade, commentators from across the political spectrum not only in Berlin, Tokyo, and Moscow but also in London, Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam were singing a similar refrain about the passing of the old global order, and sharing a similar conviction in the inevitability of a radically new one, for better or for worse. In a late 1939 book review published the previous year by a dissident German professor prophetically titled *The Crumbling of Empire: The Disintegration of the World Economy*,[7] the conservative young economist and future secretary of the upper chamber of the Dutch parliament for the dominant Catholic *Volkspartij* (KVP) Dr. Th. L. Thurlings remarked,

> In a compelling manner, Bonn, a German professor in exile now working in London, highlights the dislocation of our present-day society and shows how the Great Powers are slowly but surely disintegrating—partly through their own fault, partly through a kind of destiny that seems to seek to drive mankind to ruin.[8]

At least part of the reason that Dutch observers such as Thurlings were particularly fearful of such an imminent imperial "disintegration" was because the Netherlands Indies was seen as particularly vulnerable to the double threat posed by anti-colonial nationalism and Japanese military/imperial ambitions. The Indies were the jewel in the Dutch colonial crown, as integral a part of the modern Dutch economy and identity as Korea and Manchukuo were for Japan. The leaders of the Dutch fascist Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging (NSB), founded in 1931, were also acutely aware of both threats. In the midst of a Great Depression that hit both metropole and colony hard, the NSB party scored

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6 For a more focused discussion of Pané, his experience under the Japanese, and his work as an expression of interwar Asianism as a transnational ideology, see Ethan Mark, "'Asia's' Transwar Lineage: Nationalism, Marxism, and 'Greater Asia' in an Indonesian Inflection," *Journal of Asian Studies,* 65:3 (August 2006), pp. 461-493.

7 Written by the liberal German economist M.J. Bonn, London: Allen and Unwin.

8 Th. L., review of M.J. Bonn, *The Crumbling of Empire, in De Economist* 88:1 (December 1939), p. 258

great political successes not only by attacking communists and others as enemies of the Dutch nation and Western civilization, but by profiling itself as the nation's most determined defender of the Dutch empire.[9]

Figure 3: Illustration from the Dutch government propaganda pamphlet *Ten Years of Japanese Burrowing in the Netherlands Indies,* 1942

Though rarely remarked upon in studies of the Dutch experience of World War Two, the NSB's prewar success was indeed greatest *not* in the Dutch homeland—where it ranked fifth in its strongest prewar election result in 1935—but in the Netherlands Indies, where it polled as number one the same year. While elites back home in Holland largely sought to isolate and ignore the NSB, its leader Mussert was treated as a guest of state in the Indies, twice received with great ceremony by the hardline Governor-General de Jonge himself. Just the year before, the same de Jonge had made use of authoritarian emergency powers to send Indonesian nationalist leaders Sukarno and Hatta into indefinite exile. They would only see liberation at the hands of the Japanese in 1942, and such reactionary treatment at the hands of the Dutch colonial elite would contribute immensely to their decision to collaborate with the Japanese. Until Nazi Germany occupied the Netherlands in 1940, meanwhile, donations from the Dutch colonial community remained the single most important source of revenue for the NSB: a colonial lifeline for Holland's metropolitan fascists.[10] In postwar Dutch schoolbooks and

9 In a speech made during a 1935 publicity tour of Java, party leader Mussert proclaimed, "Countrymen, any year now could be the last of our existence as a self-sufficient nation. And I say to you, the Indies is practically defenseless, and if we lose the Indies—I cannot say it enough—at that moment there will be no possibility for a self-sufficient existence for our people. At that moment, we'll have to become a part of Germany. And no matter how much might respect our neighbors, that's surely the last thing a real Dutchman would want!" Paul Verhoeven, *Portret van Anton Adriaan Mussert* (Documentary Film), 1969/70.

10 Ibid.

historiography, however, it is only the subsequent domestic role of the NSB as loyal collaborator with the Nazis that receives regular attention.

Whether as viewed as an imminent opportunity as both Japanese and European fascists saw it, or as animminent disaster as perceived by status-quo spokesmen such as Thurlings, the sense of a Western-dominated world order in "disintegration" through a two-pronged crisis of liberal capitalism and empire was central to the global experience of the Second World War, to the form that it took, and to the course it would follow. It is as much a part of European history as of Asian history, and two must be seen in interaction in order for the war to be properly understood. Yet this is not how the history of the Second World War has usually been understood or written since. As I note in the introduction to my recent translation of Professor Yoshimi Yoshiaki's *Grassroots Fascism*,

> In recent years and with increasingly effectiveness, scholarship informed by a postcolonial problematic has sought to reveal the hidden yet essential inter-relationship and inter-dependence of the history of modern Europe with that of its colonies. Yet the history of the Second World War remains among the strongest of Eurocentric bastions, its imperial aspects relegated to the periphery of conventional narrative and knowledge. . . . The project of revealing the central role of empire in the Second World War, and in fascism, necessitates an overcoming of the Eurocentric assumptions built into the study of the war and of fascism itself.[11]

Reflecting the hegemonic effects of Eurocentrism, conventional narratives and conceptualizations of the Second World War have situated Asia's war experience as peripheral to the "main" conflict centered upon Nazi Germany. Within this framework, students of Japan's war have been long felt compelled to orient their conceptual debates around the question of whether Japan's experience qualifies for *comparison* with that of Europe. Here I would like to suggest that we can understand a great deal more about the Second World War as a global conflict precisely by locating our narrative in a transnational frame that includes Europe but whose center lies outside of it. I have tried to highlight such hidden aspects of the global context by emphasizing parallel trajectories and radicalizations of Southeast Asian anti-colonial and Japanese imperial ideologies on the eve of the global conflict—and how both joined the interwar ideological assault from left and right to feed into imperial Western Europe's sense of "disintegration." To understand the specific local expression and evolution of wartime ideologies of fascism, imperialism, and anticolonialism within such a global frame, it also remains equally important to emphasize the role of specifically local interactions, negotiations and resistances. And it is here—

11 Ethan Mark, "Introduction: The People in the War" in Yoshimi, *Grassroots Fascism*, p. 8.

centered on Japan's confrontation with China in particular—that Japan's wartime experience can be repositioned as central in global history.

By any measure it would be hard to dispute the identity of the Sino-Japanese War as a modern, total war that constituted a central part of, and played a great part in precipitating, the wider war. It involved the mobilization of millions, touched the lives of tens if not hundreds of millions more, and resulted in the destruction and reconstruction of the economies, political and social orders of the world's most populous society, along with those of the entire Japanese empire. It set the empires of Japan, the United States, and the Western powers in the Pacific on a collision course, with the rest of Asia the ultimate victim. In the same period, and within the same historical dynamic, the Soviet Union and Japan too became entangled in a "secret" war on the Manchurian frontier whose outcome had deep implications for the global conflict that subsequently ensued.

On a more theoretically profound level, the modern Sino-Japanese conflict can be seen to have represented a destructive but also dialectically productive site of struggle between imperialism and anti-colonial nationalism, signaling the transition from a world order dominated by the former to one dominated by the latter.[12] In this evolving struggle with nationalism and communism over local hearts and minds that foreshadowed developments throughout the "Third World" in the Cold War decades to come, Japanese imperialism was compelled to attempt to ideologically adjust to the demands of a "post-colonial" world, reinventing itself as a force for regional and even national "liberation" and development, and engaging with local nationalisms in profoundly complex, contradictory, and significant ways. As such the Sino-Japanese War, and the Japanese occupations of Southeast Asia that followed upon it, witnessed and heralded broader, essential global-historical developments not only of the Second World War period, but also that of the mid-20th century and beyond, which remain largely invisible from a Eurocentric perspective focused on Allies versus Axis. It can even be argued that these developments highlighted and anticipated the longer term course of 20th century history in ways that the story of the Nazi regime and its history does not. The conclusion may thus be that we learn more about 20th century global history, and the place of the Second World War within it, by centering our narrative of the war on the conflict in Asia than by focusing on the conflict within Europe's borders.

12 See Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.